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AUTHOR Scharer, Patricia L.
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ABSTRACT

A study explored the changing role of the elementary teacher within the context of book discussions as teachers move from basal instruction to literature-based reading instruction. As part of an earlier study, two upper-grade teachers consistently expressed concern during interviews and group discussions with their colleagues about how to foster both literary appreciation and literacy achievement through book discussions. Three additional classroom book discussions were videotaped one year after videotapings were made in connection with the earlier study. Both teachers were interviewed before and after the book discussions concerning how they planned, organized, facilitated, and evaluated the discussions. Results indicated that although both teachers had goals of fostering child-centered discussions supporting higher-level thinking, one teacher seemed unable to adjust her instructional stance in ways that would foster a more student-centered discussion, while the other teacher appeared to value students' interpretive and critical thinking and was also able to orchestrate classroom conditions to foster such talk during book discussions. Findings support the argument that teachers may claim to value creative, interpretive responses but concentrate mainly on literal responses in the discussions they actually conduct. (Three tables of data are included; 19 references are attached.) (RS)

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Patricia L. Scharer
The Ohio State University at Lima
4240 Campus Drive
Lima, OH 45804

W: (419) 221-1641
H: (614) 389-5083

# Perceptions and Practices:

# An Exploration of Literature Discussions Conducted by Teachers Moving Toward Literature-based Reading Instruction

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Running Head: Literature Discussions



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# Perceptions and Practices: An exploration of literature discussions conducted by teachers moving toward literature-based reading instruction

Talking with students about what they have read is an important component of reading instruction. The nature of such conversations, however, has been characterized as dealing more with what the child has remembered than what the child has experienced (Purves in Saul, 1984). Such student-teacher interactions contrast significantly with "Grand Conversations" described by Eeds and Wells (1989) as the creation of an aesthetic object through the interaction of the text and the shared responses of multiple readers. Hynds (1990) argues that "teachers need to create classrooms where students are creating unique interpretations, not guessing at predetermined answers" (p. 176) through opportunities to participate in discussions about what they have read rather than recitations. True discussions, however, only occur in less than 10% of school experiences (Dillon, 1985). Although many professional materials advocate the use of discussions characterized by high level questions in both narrative and content area reading lessons, such recommendations appear to have had little influence on classroom instruction (Gall, 1985). Dillon (1985) argues that "research illuminating the use of questions in classroom discussion is fragmented and scarce. True discussion (as distinguished from recall-oriented recitation) is rarer still" (p. 50).

In the past decade, interest has grown in the use of literature to support literacy instruction within classroom contexts that support an aesthetic, lived-through experience

during reading (Many, 1991; McGee, 1992). Implementation of literature-based literacy instruction requires a redefinition of the teacher's role from an implementor of a prescribed program to an instructional decision-maker charged with planning effective classroom contexts for reading and talking about texts (Scharer & Detwiler, 1992). In a study exploring changes in teachers and classrooms as the use of children's literature for reading instruction increased (Scharer, 1991; 1992), data analysis revealed that teachers experienced difficulties organizing, sustaining, and evaluating book discussions in their classrooms. Without detailed suggestions of a basal teacher's manual, they were unsure of how to best interact with students in ways that fostered not only reading achievement, but also a positive attitude toward reading. The purpose of this study was to further explore the changing role of the elementary teacher within the context of book discussions as teachers move from basal instruction to literature-based reading instruction by examining the relationship of the teacher's role to the students' ability to display critical and interpretive responses to literature.

## Methodology

### Participants

This research is a continuation of a nine-month study that examined changes in five teachers and classrooms during implementation of literature-based reading instruction (Scharer, 1991; 1992). During the first study, two upper-grade teachers (Andrea, grade 6, and Terry, grade 5) consistently expressed concerns during interviews and group discussions with their

colleagues about how to foster both literary appreciation and literacy achievement through book discussions. Both teachers had extensive experience using basal reading materials and were gradually increasing their use of paperback novels as basis for reading instruction.

Early in the first study, Andrea (Grade 6) explained her dilemma about talking with students about books.

> During the story, I stop and explain things, but I don't let them respond. They just sit there with their mouths closed...There would be no problem at all getting them into discussions, but I wonder how we connect that with what we are supposed to be doing via the course of study and the grade card.

She expressed interest in learning the opinions of her students concerning the books they were reading, but was unsure how book discussions would either satisfy the district's course of study or inform grading decisions. As she increased the use of trade books in her class during the school year, she began to try various ways to organize opportunities for students to talk about books in large and small group formats (led by both teacher and students) as well as individual presentations followed by group discussion.

Terry's fifth-graders talked about trade books as a whole group as they sat at their desks in five straight rows or in small groups when they gathered about a small table. The sessions were always led by Terry so that students "will be settled down to business rather than getting together to giggle

or draw pictures." She noted that her students found it difficult to adequately answer "Why" questions when discussing stories. She questioned how to talk with students without turning discussions into "quiz situations" that would destroy enjoyment.

Data collection for the first study ended in May, 1990. Both teachers agreed to participate in this follow-up study during April and May of the following year.

Data Collection

Transcripts of interviews and group discussions with other teachers related to book discussions in Andrea's and Terry's rooms and audio-tapes of one book discussion in each classroom from the first study provided base-line data. One year later, three additional book discussions in each classroom were video-taped over a two-month period. Teacher interviews before and after the book discussions were audiotaped and focused on how Andrea and Terry planned, organized, facilitated, and evaluated book discussions. Tapes of all book discussions and interviews were transcribed for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Transcripts of all book discussions were analyzed for patterns of student-teacher turn-taking, types of teacher questions, and student responses during discussions. Student-teacher turn-taking were coded according to cycles that began with a teacher comment. A turn involving single responses by the teacher and one student, for example, was coded T-S. Turns with multiple student responses were identified with the corresponding number of student responses. All teacher questions were coded

according to Nystrand and Gamoran's (1991) categories as either authentic (with no prespecified answers that are incorporated into subsequent discussion) or inauthentic questions (intended to assess student's literal knowledge). Student responses were then coded as either literal (reiterating facts), interpretive (requiring inference or prediction), or critical (focusing on literary elements such as plot, characterization, or theme). Finally, interview data were analyzed to determine patterns of teachers' reflections, questions, and concerns about the use of book discussions in their classrooms.

## Results

Analysis of book discussion data revealed differences between the two teachers in terms of turn-taking patterns, teacher questioning behavior and student responses.

### Turn-taking Patterns

According to Cazden (1988), student-teacher talk after the reading of a story or book has typically followed the pattern of Initiation/Response/Evaluation (IRE) as the teacher controls both the question and the acceptance of the single correct answer. The initiating question is asked by the teacher in ways that suggest that the student is to identify the correct response which is already known by the teacher or provided in the teacher's manual. Student-teacher turn-taking patterns in Terry's classroom consistently followed the IRE pattern (see Table 1). Between 80% and 98% of the turns began with a teacher

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Insert Table 1 about here

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question and ended with a single student responding with phrases

rather than sentences. For example, when discussing the main character in Weasel (DeFelice, 1990), Terry asked:

T: What did he do?

S6: He killed people.

T: Who did he kill?

S6: Ezra.

T: Ezra happened to be one of them, but who were they? What was his main job?

S4: To drive out the Indians.

T: To drive out the Indians. The government had given him this job. Driving out the Indians from where?

S4: From the state.

T: What state?

S4: Ohio.

Patterns of turn-taking in Andrea's classroom also dominated by single student responses, but to a lesser degree than in Terry's class. Between 33% and 61% of the four discussions involved more than one student response between teacher questions or comments as students listened to their peers and responded to their opinions. The following discussion took place after Andrea asked students to identify their favorite character in Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIHM (O'Brien, 1971).

S2: I liked Nicodemus too because he wanted to do things that no rats have done before. He wanted to live off the land and not steal from other people. He wanted to try it out.

T: He wanted to be independent. What do you think he felt that?

S3: Because the rats who were not intelligent would steal off the market place and he did not think that it would be right to steal. Most of the stuff they had was stolen and he wanted to be more independent.

S2: I think that he wanted to be independent because they got caught when stealing and if they got caught by the farmer, he could kill them.

S3: If they kept up the stealing, someone would find them out.

Types of Teacher Questions

Research by Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) examined the effects of authentic and inauthentic teacher questions on student engagement and achievement. Their results show that strong student engagement fostered by authentic questions without prespecified answers has a positive effect on student achievement. Less than 20% of Terry's questions were coded as authentic. Most questions required brief, literal responses (see Table 2). When correct answers were given, Terry acknowledged

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Insert Table 2 about here

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the answer and asked the next question. During discussions in Andrea's classroom, however, a greater number of questions were authentic requiring students to provide sometimes lengthy

explanations of their opinions. While discussing Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977), for example, students offered their opinions of the novel's ending.

S3: At first, when she died, I though I was dreaming. Then I figured out that he said something about the rope breaking.

S1: Chapter 11 kind of confused me. I kind of like understood it, but then he said she couldn't have died and I know she didn't die and all these things. And I was like, did she die or didn't she die? And then he walked in and he punched his little sister. It was like, Oh, God.

S8: Well, I got kind of mad at Jessie when he slapped his little sister, because, I mean, she was just little and she didn't understand. Cause, I mean, she's never really lost a good friend or anything, and it wasn't her fault. Actually, it was his fault. Well, I mean, it wasn't his fault that she died, but it was his fault that he was so mad.

Types of Student Responses

Student responses (see Table 3) were coded as literal if facts from the story were recalled or listed. When talking about Sounder (Armstrong, 1969), for example, Terry asked students how many years the father was in prison, the distance to school, and the number of schools nearby. Students answered with brief

Insert Table 3 about here

factual responses. Other student responses were coded as interpretive requiring inference or prediction beyond a literal understanding of the text. For example, Terry asked students if the name, Weasel, was a good one for the main character in DeFelice's novel (Weasel, DeFelice, 1990). One student used knowledge of weasels to infer that the name was quite appropriate because, "Weasels are kind of sneaky and ferocious and he [the main character] was just like that." Critical responses expressed student reactions to literary elements such as plot, characterization, or theme. Andrea's students presented their opinions of the plot in Rascal (North, 1963) through critical comments such as, "Well, I think that it [the book] is sort of slow going, but I like it because some of the things that Rascal does are funny, like how he eats at the table." The greatest percentage of student responses in Terry's class were coded as literal (80% to 87%). Between 8% and 12% were interpretive and even fewer were identified as critical. Although the greatest number of student responses in Andrea's classes were also literal, there were many more critical and interpretive comments than in Terry's class.

Patterns of Teacher-Student Interactions

Although the four book discussions in each classroom spanned two school years with two different groups of students and were based on different books, there were consistencies within each classroom. When students in Terry's class talked about books, they usually spoke in response to inauthentic questions using

brief phases at the literal level. Students in Andrea's class were more likely to talk to one another using interpretive and critical responses based on a mixture of authentic and inauthentic questions used by Andrea.

Patterns in Teacher Interviews

During interviews before and after the book discussions, both teachers described their goals concerning book discussions as helping children express their opinions about what they are reading. Both felt that opportunities to talk about books should foster higher level thinking "instead of just recalling facts" (Andrea, grade 6). They were also consistent in the way they described their roles during book discussions that would best support such thinking. In the first interview, Terry explained that

> Usually, I start out with a few key questions to get them going and then try to stimulate them into making comments on the book. A lot of times they will carry it and start making comments maybe disagreeing with each other on what happened.

During the final interview, Terry reflected that her goal for students during book discussions was

> ...to express their thoughts in a way that others can understand them. It isn't just like reciting where you give a right or wrong answer. I usually try to work my questions so they will cause the children to express their opinion, not just, "What was the main idea?"

Similarly, Andrea identified the goal of "trying to get myself

out of the center of their reading program so they will start to communicate with each other about this." During both interviews, Andrea expressed discomfort about her role during book discussions fearing that she spent too much time questioning for literal comprehension and that her actions and questions controlled the conversation excessively. Earlier concerns about fitting book discussions into the district course of study and grade cards, however, had lessened. By the end of the study Andrea viewed evaluation as

> ...a combination of things. It will be class discussion, what they come up with in the discussions, questions they come up with and their reactions.

Terry described evaluation of reading in her classroom in terms of the number of books students read each grading period and worksheets. Participation in discussions was only recorded in her grade book if she felt that the student had not read the book. Unless marked as unsatisfactory, she assumed that every child's performance was adequate.

## Discussion

This research supports Hynds' argument that "Teachers may claim to value creative, interpretive responses, for instance, but concentrate mainly on literal responses in the discussion they actually conduct." (Hynds, 1992, p. 82). Although both teachers had goals of fostering child-centered discussions supporting higher level thinking, important differences were identified in teachers' actions which were then reflected in students' responses. Terry, for example, typically asked literal, inauthentic questions in ways closely resembling

Cazden's IRE pattern (1988). Consequently, students' responses were brief, factual, and directed to the teacher. Book discussions appeared to be times for students to demonstrate literal comprehension through individual responses to Terry's questions with little opportunity to build on the responses of other students. Although Terry had verbalized her concern that too many questions would turn discussions into "quiz" situations, she seemed unable to adjust her instructional stance in ways that would foster a more student-centered discussion.

Andrea was consistently concerned that book discussions were placing her in the center rather than the students. Data analysis revealed, however, that she used a combination of inauthentic and authentic questions and her students were more likely to demonstrate critical and interpretive thinking than students in Terry's class. There were also a greater number of student-to-student responses during discussions in Andrea's classroom. Her students seemed to use conversations rather than recitations to shape and refocus personal responses to literature.

Bruner (1986) argues that teachers, through their stance, transmit their beliefs to students concerning how texts should be viewed and what will be valued following the reading of the text. There were clear distinctions between the stances of the two teachers in this study. Although both teachers were using trade books for over half of the reading instruction in their classrooms, Terry's stance remained firmly and consistently within a literal interpretation of texts with the teacher in control of verbal interactions. Andrea, on the other hand,

appeared to value students' interpretive and critical thinking and was also able to orchestrate classroom conditions to foster such talk during book discussions.

As teachers increase the use of trade books for classroom reading instruction, students will benefit from reading interesting, authentic, high-quality trade books. For the change to go beyond substituting one set of texts for another, however, the ways teachers use literature must also change. Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon (1990) found that although content-area teachers could define the qualities of a good discussion, the discussions in their classrooms rarely matched their definitions and were more likely to focus on controlling student behavior and covering text material than encouraging students to create meaning by interacting with the text and each other. Similarly, this study points out the difficulties teachers may experience in conducting student-centered opportunities to talk about literature.

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Table 1

Student-Teacher Turn-Taking Patterns by Percentages

| | 1990 | | 1991 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Terry (Grade 5) | | | | |
| | Blind Colt | Sounder | Where the Red Fern Grows | Weasel |
| T-S | 87 | 80 | 84 | 98 |
| T-2S | 13 | 20 | 13 | 2 |
| T-3S | | | 3 | |
| Andrea (Grade 6) | | | | |
| | Bridge to Terabithia | Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIHM | Rascal | Bridge to Terabithia |
| T-S | 67 | 65 | 74 | 39 |
| T-2S | 23 | 19 | 24 | 34 |
| T-3S | | 16 | | 15 |
| T-4S | | | | 12 |
| T-5S | | | 2 | |
| T-6S | 10 | | | |

Note. T-S = One student spoke before the teacher spoke again.

T-3S = Three students spoke before the teacher spoke again.

Table 2

Types of Teacher Questions by Percentages

| | 1990 | | 1991 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Terry (Grade 5) | | | | |
| | Blind Colt | Sounder | Where the Red Fern Grows | Weasel |
| Authentic | 14 | 12 | 15 | 17 |
| Inauthentic | 86 | 88 | 85 | 83 |
| Andrea (Grade 6) | | | | |
| | Bridge to Terabithia | Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIHM | Rascal | Bridge to Terabithia |
| Authentic | 46 | 31 | 41 | 33 |
| Inauthentic | 54 | 69 | 59 | 67 |

Table 3

Types of Student Responses by Percentages

| | 1990 | | 1991 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Terry (Grade 5) | | | | |
| | Blind Colt | Sounder | Where the Red Fern Grows | Weasel |
| Literal | 87 | 81 | 80 | 87 |
| Interpretive | 13 | 12 | 8 | 13 |
| Critical | 0 | 7 | 2 | 0 |
| Andrea (Grade 6) | | | | |
| | Bridge to Terabithia | Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIHM | Rascal | Bridge to Terabithia |
| Literal | 38 | 47 | 58 | 54 |
| Interpretive | 35 | 33 | 26 | 42 |
| Critical | 27 | 20 | 16 | 4 |